



CONCEPTS OF CHILDHOOD AND THEIR ASSOCIATED VULNERABILITIES

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ABSTRACT

The position of children in our society, in relationship to other groups is the most vulnerable and subordinate one. Thus childhood is a time period in which children live their lives as well as a part of society which are being controlled by the adult world. Unfortunately this control of the adults, their care, protectiveness and guidance often creates an illusion among the adults to believe that a child's childhood is just an abstraction. Thus any decision taken on behalf of children, as mostly done in every society reflects an impact on the children as well as on the society. However, often these decisions leads to tragic loss, a loss reflected through wilful, intentional and preventable act of abuse. Such acts often occur right in the sanctity of the child's protective environment – the place where he/she ought to feel safe and protected from harm. This study traces out historically, the various concepts of childhood as portrayed through various studies and the associated vulnerability of children were discussed. It also reflected the 'human becoming' nature of children – a nature which are changeable, incomplete, lacks the self-possession and self-control that would allow them the independence of thought and action gaining respect. Hence bounded by their defenceless situation, it becomes the role of the adults to take up decisions on their behalf - often leading to child abuse, exploitation and various other crimes, committed against children reflecting the outcomes of such decision-making power of the adults.

KEYWORDS: Childhood, Child Abuse, Vulnerabilities and Exploitation

INTRODUCTION

When we talk about children, it is our common perception and understanding to consider them as that dependent group of our society, in whose life continuous adult interference and guidance is very much essential. To a certain extent this thought is practical, as a child in his/her crucial age of growing up requires an environment that enables them to learn to distinguish between right and wrong for them. This is because when we compare the position of children in our society, in relationship to other groups they hold a most vulnerable and subordinate position. Therefore in their initial stage of growing up an unadulterated love, care, affection and a proper guidance are essential. Thus childhood is a time period in which children live their lives as well as a part of society which are being controlled by the adult world.

Unfortunately this control of the adults, their care, protectiveness and guidance often creates an illusion among the adults to believe that a child's childhood is just an abstraction, considering someone of general quality or characteristics just suggesting a state of being (Aitken, 2001). Therefore even though children are active agents the nature of their activities, power and rights are considered in relation to their role as a generational group in society and their place in the generational order (Alanen, 2000, 2009; M.Honig, 2009; Mayall, 2002). Hence quite an interesting study appears throughout history when one tries to disseminate the relationship between a child and an adult understanding their world in collaboration with each other – where both the above mentioned contradictory factors persist.

According to Danish Sociologist Jens Qvortrup (1991, 1993a, 1993b, 1994a, 1994b, 2009) childhood constitutes a particular structural form which is exposed to the same societal forces as adulthood; and it is not just a period of life but the period when children themselves act as a co-constructor of childhood and the

society. Therefore children are an integral part of society, where like adults they are also active participants. Hence children both affect and are affected by major societal events and developments. Thus any decision taken on behalf of children, as mostly done in every society reflects an impact on the children as well as on the society. Zelizer (1985) noted this point as a historical trend observed towards increasing sentimentalism and over-protectiveness towards children. However it was countered by Qvortrup (1991) who noted that in today's world children have moved from being useless to useful and it is the nature of their contributions to society has also changed which are required to be accepted. Therefore children not just actively contribute to the adult culture and their own childhoods in a direct way; instead they creatively appropriate information from the adult world to produce their own, unique peer cultures. This intertwined world of adults and children are required to be presented through a child's point of view. Therefore to give the understanding how a decision made for a child, considering them to be incapable of doing that of their own, many times lead to increased vulnerability – hence destroying their childhood in the process of creating it.

Historical Transformation of Childhood

Historian Philippe Ariès (1962) argued that prior to industrialization, children 'did not count'. By the end of the sixteenth century, 'coddling' or pampering evolved when parents began recognizing the pleasure they got from watching their children. Though some moralists countered by stating that, a child being an anarchist should require parentally imposed strictures and tutelage. However Adrian Wilson (1980) points out that it does not matter whether childhood is regarded as a state of weakness or imperfection, or one of innocence and grace, what matters is the development of reasons, and this was based on a specific understanding of children's natures as different from that of an adult. By the nineteenth century the

attitude of indifference towards children had undergone a radical transformation. The association of children and parents became increasingly stretched and, in places, broken. With the belief that future rested on children's shoulders, certain aspects of societal change were considered too important to be the sole responsibility of parents – thus education and health were institutionalized. Some theorists suggest that the latter half of the twentieth century signalled the death of childhood and adolescence (Hengst 1987; Frønes 1994; Cunningham 1995). The distinction between adulthood and childhood may possibly begin to lose its edge, as the welfare of children became a public concern. According to Postman (1982) the destruction of the childhood realm is also traceable to changes in public education, methods of upbringing, and how families are now formed. Noting this speculation about the disappearance of distinctive adulthood and childhood, David Oldman (1994) cautions that because adults control productive activities, children may now exist as a hidden 'class' to be exploited. Now apart from understanding the historical progression towards the notion of 'Childhood' it is also important to identify the various conceptions of childhood that are being accepted from past to present scenario.

As stated by Ariès, 'the idea of childhood is not to be confused with affection for children: it corresponds to an awareness of the particular nature of childhood, that particular nature which distinguishes the child from the adult, even the young adult. In medieval society this awareness was lacking.' That was the reason, that in medieval society as soon as a child could live without the constant attention of his/her mother or nanny, he/she belongs to adult society. Steve Mintz, pioneering work 'Huck's Raft' (2004) has tried to bridge the early work on conceptions of adults to a more direct focus on children's lives. According to Mintz, 'the modern conception of childhood as a period of peril and freedom; an odyssey of psychological self-discovery and growth; and a world apart with its own values, culture and psychology.'

Hence childhood is inevitably shaped and constrained by society, time and circumstances. However in today's world there seems to be much less concern for children's lives and about their childhood – specifically the childhood of working class and poor children. This phenomenon was best referred by Finnish sociologist, Leena Alanen (1990) as 'children negatively defined'. By this she meant that in today's world and through adult's perception, children are defined primarily by what they are going to be and not by what they presently are.

Children and Their Associated Vulnerabilities

Industrialization brought economic growth and an improved quality of life for all individuals throughout most economy, but also it has brought along with it a range of social, economic, ecological and epidemic problems. How have these problems affected the lives of children? York Bradshaw (1993) noted, development research has 'either ignored children or relegated them to a secondary status', which is highly 'unfortunate because children represent one of the most vulnerable groups in most societies'. Thus it should be the responsibility of the policy-makers as well as the social scientists to highlight the position of the children and their dwindling childhood. Relating the issues that affect the life of the children as the various social problems, it has been identified that children and social problems can be represented in a two interrelated ways – children as social problems and the social problem of children. According to Penelope Leach (1994) the first relates viewing children as an 'out-group'. It meant children are not seen as adults in the making but as inferior and not worthy of the same respects as adults.

Thus viewing children as social problems also led to blaming the children itself – that is the tendency to hold certain children personally responsible for the complex social and economic forces and problems that so dramatically affect their lives. Quite contrary to this belief, the other way reflects the social problem of children through our extreme worry and anxiety about their safety.

There are various social problems that can lead to a loss of a child and his/her childhood, like many inevitable and unforeseen circumstances such as war, disease or disaster. But the most tragic loss out of all these is to lose a child through wilful, intentional and preventable act of abuse. Such acts often occur right in the sanctity of the child's protective environment – the place where he/she ought to feel safe and protected from harm. Though child abuse is not a new issue, but neither is it easily defined nor its prevalence easily estimated. This fact is due to the generally held belief and value in most societies that children belong to their parents. As a result any society's attempt to define and control child abuse immediately runs up against issues of family privacy and the belief that the people have right to bring up their own children without government interference or regulation. Numerous and interrelated factors contribute to child abuse and neglect, including poverty, parental substance abuse, social isolation and a lack of experience in caring for young children. Although abuse occurs in families from all social classes, it occurs in a larger proportion of poor families in which parents face a multitude of challenges. Some of the effects of child abuse and child neglect are fatal, some leave physical injuries from which it may take years to recover, and other leaves permanent emotional scars. Thus children more than any other group, are the main victims of such evils – victims of anger, violence, and neglect in their own societies, communities and families. Similarly given their dependency on adults, children often have little choice regarding with whom they associate and where they live. These limited options as stated by Finkelhor & Dzuiba-Leatherman (1994) are especially unfortunate for economically disadvantaged children living in a dangerous neighbourhood and hence increasing their 'vulnerability to intimate victimisation'.

CONCLUSION

In the above sections historically we trace out, the various concepts of childhood as portrayed through various studies and the associated vulnerability of children were discussed. It also reflected the 'human becoming' nature of children – a nature which are changeable, incomplete, lacks the self-possession and self-control that would allow them the independence of thought and action gaining respect. Hence bounded by their defenceless situation, it becomes the role of the adults to take up decisions on their behalf. Child abuse, exploitation and various other crimes, committed against children reflects the outcomes of such decision-making power of the adults. Therefore it is quite evident, why and how children are subjected to multifarious crimes due to their vulnerable and subordinate conditions. Crime committed against children, leads to not only physical and psychological harm destroying their childhood but also ruining a child's future survival. A child gets abused for various purposes, such as for sexual exploitation, for labour, arms and drug peddling and for various associated illegal activities. Many a study has been conducted to understand the scenarios of child exploitation, that is, its extent, causes, impacts and legal and social framework under which it can be prevented. But apart from these objectives another perspective of these crimes are its impact and understanding by the 'Children themselves'. Therefore in future studies should be initiated that seeks to identify and understand the graveness of the crime committed

against children and from the point of view of the children. What has been the situation? How they felt and fought against it? What condition led to giving in to it? What are their points of view towards their life? These are some of the questions that often remain unanswered as often we fail to pose them to the children themselves. Hence this study follows the path of analysing some of the tormented children's childhood, from the point of view of the children themselves.

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